

The least known unsolved mystery around Mertzon was one reported once before of my son John being hijacked of his third grade report card on a three-block walk to the house. The robbery became a serial-type crime. Several semesters into college passed before a grade report appeared again bearing his name. Do understand the boys walked home from school across several vacant lots of cedar bushes thick enough to hide a robber gang, but the report card case was never solved.

One other long-standing mystery showed a big break in 1995. The mystery goes back to right at the end of the drouth of the 1950s. Two neighbors over on the east side of the shortgrass country attended an Angora goat sale in Central Texas. Things looked better for all phases of the hair and curved horn business. Spring kid hair sales had risen a tad, and stocker nannies showed slight demand for the first time in six years. Drouth-stricken ranges were yet to recover, but the smallest glimmer of hope sends a herder bounding off, thinking in his mind: "A BOOM IS ON!, A BOOM IS ON!"

These two gentleman operated some of the best goat country around. For sure, they didn't want to come in the game too late for the bargains. Consignors to the sale provided big platters of barbecue and a generous supply of cold keg beer to relieve the July heat of the sale barn. Waiters passed through the crowd keeping the glasses full. Be a hardhearted person indeed to criticize a couple of herders for feeling festive, being so close to the beginning of a big boom.

The auctioneer was a young ambitious fellow who brought the crowd under a spell. Mighty prices of as much as \$200 per head opened the offerings. Understand, every hoof sold after the first year or so of the Big Drouth went for packer prices, whatever the species. These goats were selling by the head and as high as 60 bucks for a good sire. Caught in the frenzy of the chant of the ring, our two subjects bought three billies apiece. Sales programs are made of slick paper easy to blur under a ballpoint, and our men sat far enough away from ringside to allow for confusion. The light was also less than adequate in the auction lobby by the time the last keg floated, so in a spirit of grand camaraderie, they split the cost of the six billies and took a joint receipt back to the ranch.

Much later under the moon and a flashlight, they sorted the billies on the trailer and cut out three head. The goats had horn tatoos, but like I said, notations on the sales catalogues were blurred and hard to read under the flashlight. Other than truckers, few people have legged a billy goat off a trailer in darkness, but if you have, I feel sure you agree the slightest indisposition from liquid refreshments makes inspecting horn tatoos and eartags very tedious. The next day the two goat buyers stayed at the ranch and the goats probably stayed penned until late afternoon. No efforts were made to straighten out the nocturnal division.

Over the years, I was to hear the story so many times that I began to fill in missing parts, like: "and next you would get out and open the bumper gates," or " wait, you are forgetting the part about dropping the flashlight in the water trough."

But the more the tale was told, the more the herder I knew best began to suspect he might have been cheated. In 1970, he pastured goats joining the Old Ranch. We had a lot of dealings throwing his nannies and kids back across the fence. I think I must have heard the whole story six times a year for over 10 years. Now and then I'd see the other party, but he was working on bigger deals than sorting six head of billy goats.

The loss or the gain must have been inconsequential as they recovered from the drouth and went through a couple of more dry spells without losing their lands or their minds. Over Christmas, I met my main informer at the grocery store. We talked until folks, lapping the store for a second time, began to scowl at us for blocking off a major passageway.

On the way to the ranch, I realized he didn't retell the billy goat story. Slowly, slowly an item popped up. Last spring, his consignment of kid hair topped the market. The dilemma now is to decide whether to tip the other guy off that he must have taken the bad end of the long-ago midnight goat work...

OmniPage #1

OmniPage #2

OmniPage #3

OmniPage #4

OmniPage #5

OmniPage #6

OmniPage #257

OmniPage #258

OmniPage #259

OmniPage #260§

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